



For Goode House 2-23-2023



WHILE I WORK IN MY STUDIO, my landlord performs her annual walk-through of my apartment and texts her concern: it's pretty griefy in there. She has found grief the color and consistency of chewed Bubble Yum all over the single-family unit but especially in the following areas: in the living room where we used to get high and watch *Sixty-three Scariest Sea Monsters*, on the floor around the bed we bought together in a different city, and in the shower, which she specifically instructed us upon moving in two years ago to keep clean due to the potential for both grief and water damage.

"I'm so sorry. I'll clean it immediately. I've been so busy with the semester," I write back to her. The grief makes it hard to type, my fingers sticking to the phone screen and my hands coated with a pink that feels like ceramics slip.

"I'll come back in three months to check. You know the lease."

When we signed, I skimmed the lengthy grief clause, the instructions for prevention and maintenance, the consequences should tenants leave their grief unchecked. None of this, I figured, would apply to us. We would fall more in love in these sunny rooms.

"She's being really judgmental," my best friend says over the phone. I am walking from the studio to the bar you thought was tacky, the one with a hundred old clocks on the wall. It is only three but it is five where my friend lives.

"It has gotten kind of bad, though. She has a point," I say. My body is hot with shame, the neighborhood a blur of red brick and gold leaves around me. "Well, don't be too hard on yourself. She doesn't get to control how you grieve."

I order a beer and drink it fast, open a book full of poems I won't talk to you about and stare at it. The clocks, shaped like owls and cats and tiny wooden houses, are stuck on a hundred different times.



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FOUR MONTHS AGO, BACK IN SPRING, you decided you wanted a baby after all. We'd been together six years, which is to say five visits to my best friend, or two art degrees, or four Chanukahs in my parents' too-clean, "post-grief" living room—"We don't dwell, we keep busy," my mother said brightly—or innumerable concerts in abandoned warehouses on the edges of cities, or

You hadn't thought it through, you said. You were caught up in how much you liked, then loved me, then the pressure of school, then the move to this city, then finding freelance illustration work, then the new band, then the tour.

Now you'd had time to think. You wanted to be a father like your own father, to teach your child how to play bass, how to thread a bike through the city's rambling park, how to draw comics. You were ready to move your life forward. You'd already quit drinking.

I remember digging my nails into my arms while you spoke, as if I was made of wet clay. As if I could sculpt myself into the kind of woman who wanted these things too.

"Are you sure?" you asked, looking down at your new boots. "You'd be really good at it."

"You sound like my mother."

We were on our back porch eating almost-moldy raspberries. The day

was sunny but cool for early June. I wore a fuchsia dress I haven't worn since, the one you said looked prettier than my usual denim.

"I'm sorry—I don't want to hurt you," you said. You pulled the zipper of your Dickies jacket up and down, as if coaxing your heart to jump out. "Hey, look, you should have what you want. We all should. Thank you for being honest with me." As I said these words, they floated above me, thin and grey and empty. I shoved the raspberries into my mouth, imagined dissolving into that red-pink mess. ♡ ♡ ♡

ON THE BAR STOOL, viscous drops of my pink grief blot out the poems. I'm not sure what time it is, only that the one window is dark. I swipe at my face. Pink glazes my palms like honey, makes it harder to let go of the pint glass. After a while, I settle into a leaden silence with the rest of the regulars. On my left, a middle-aged man in a messenger hat whose older brother died of an overdose. To his left, a younger woman who always wears the same ripped jeans and whose girlfriend cheated on her. On my right, a woman my age, a painter who no longer loves her husband. Late at night, we unfold our losses like half-torn maps. Grief gathers in our lungs, the words for everything trapped inside us, insects flailing in the fly tape of our throats.

"He was angry at me for not being honest," she said.
"Oh, screw that."

She shakes her head, smiles at me. I can tell she is holding something

back, but I don't push.

I go to the fridge to get us a last round. A muddy breeze blows through my open window, carries with it a loud car stereo, something by Fleetwood Mac. We both love Stevie's voice. We talk about music, our favorite concerts. I tell her about seeing Rilo Kiley five times with my best friend. She tells me about meeting her husband at a Sleater Kinney show, how he had all their albums. "I thought that meant he would get it, you know?" She laughs, exhaling a small cloud of pink. She tells me her daughter digs PJ Harvey, how she is already this beautifully strange person, craves the goriest fairy tales, writes her own stories filled with angry witches.

My landlord is the kind of mother I would have wanted to be: in love and open and fascinated. But I know my body wouldn't ever follow. It has always told me what it doesn't want, how it cannot transform. Now, in this space that will always be a little sad, a little pink, I wonder what it does want; what kinds of joy I still need to give it. ●



package from my best friend and strands of my hair, which you loved the most in summer, how it would get curly and big before a rain.

"IF YOU WOULD JUST BE MORE CONSCIENTIOUS on a daily basis, this would not be a problem," my landlord writes in a follow-up text.

I'm at my studio not working. October light streams through the windows and though this heat is good for the clay, it makes me want to punch the walls. I'm not working on a series of fairy-tale heroines turned monsters. Snow whites and red riding hoods and sleeping beauties, alone and together, sprout tentacles and bat wings, grow fox fur on their arms and legs. Some of them have my face and some are my best friend.

"I love the intensity you've created. But they also seem a little too—something," you told me on your last visit here, a few days before you moved out. "Maybe try making them softer?"

"What does that even mean?"

"Hey, don't listen to me; it's your medium."

Then you were opening a bag of salt and vinegar chips you'd brought, offering me some. Then you were on your phone, looking up a new video of my favorite singer-songwriter to show me.

It felt exceedingly normal, until it did not.

"It's not an issue with the unit itself," the landlord texts.

She would know. She lived here for five years before us with her husband and then their baby daughter, claims they had no significant problems. The tenant(s) must simply exercise regularly and get at least seven hours of sleep per night, she put in the lease which is printed on robin's-egg-blue paper. It is highly recommended that the tenant(s) eat three (3) handfuls of greens a day, stick to a morning routine, communicate with associates and/or friends and/or lovers clearly.

They created innumerable gallons of shared joy, which is the color and consistency of fresh orange juice flecked with lemon, feels like a creek bubbling around the chest, appears in the mornings in beautiful containers. Eventually they needed a larger house in which to store it. They moved a few streets away, into a two-family unit with a soundproof music room for him (he plays drums and bass like you) and a writing room for her (she writes novels when she's not walking around the city monitoring her tenants' grief). Now their daughter is five.

"Thanks for the advice!!" I text her back. Then I kick one of my half-done, not-
it-enough monster selves, cry when my foot hurts.

Put on the dress your best friend made you. It is a patchwork of blue floral dresses she found at thrift stores, twenty different shades of faded blue. Call her and apologize. Start writing her a letter in the blue journal.

Sculpt a pile of sweetgum seedpods for no reason other than you find them strange. It takes days: they are very intricate. Still it is a kind of moving forward. You are making something. Arrange the finished ones in the basket your parents' engagement gift came in, as if they are treats.

Get drunk one night and swallow half the sweetgum seeds down. It will feel like your grief is scraping your voice, puncturing your lungs, stopping your heart. This is the way many people go, you know, from eating too much of their own grief, the substance calcifying inside.

Lie on your griefy floor and feel your breath slow. Out of the corner of your eye, see all your tools glinting beside the blue journal. Haul your body

to the bathroom and throw up, jamming your fingers down your throat. Your grief will cut you on its way out, filling your mouth with blood.

Sculpt yourself now. At this point the pink will be harder to manipulate, rigid in places. Use the heat of your hands. Touch it gently, lovingly, the way he once touched you. Give her pink tears and sharp edges. Fill her chest with owl clocks, cat clocks, tiny house clocks, all telling their different, joyful, painful times.



WHEN THE LANDLORD KNOCKS hard at the door, I've forgotten about the walk-through. She follows me into the living room, eying the grief still stuck

between the floorboards like candle wax. Her lips are glossed orange-gold, her skin perfumed with grapefruit bergamot. I breathe in and out, wait for

her to tell me I am finished here, that my life will never be as bright as hers.

Instead, she sits down heavily on the couch and sighs. "Do you have any beer?" I notice a small knob of pink in her hair, her curls sticking out of it

like wires.

"Oh, yeah. I think so."

I bring back two Millers. She opens hers and downs half of it.

"You made those sculptures, right? I think I saw your work in a magazine

once. I like them; they're weird."

"Hey, thanks." I take a short sip, my face flushing. "I'm really sorry I haven't cleaned enough. It's taking longer than I thought to get it under—"

"It's okay! I might have been overly harsh in the lease. Oy, you should see my own place right now. It can creep up before you even realize."

She finishes her beer; I bring her another. I watch her drink it in two long gulps. "Might as well—no reason not to." Something flickers across her

face. "Hey, so what happened to what's his face?"

I tell her a little about you, what I couldn't give you.

She says, "That's rich. Wait until he finds out parenting isn't all precious moments." She tells me about the day her daughter took off her shoes at Target, threw them at her, and then knocked over an entire Halloween display because she couldn't have the expensive werewolf mask. She tells me how she can't get more than ten minutes of writing in a day before her daughter needs something else.

We talk about the projects we're trying to finish, about the ways this work is and isn't what we imagined. How sometimes we still don't feel like we're real artists. The fucked-up-ness of that. I bring us more beers.

She tells me about her miscarriage over the summer. Her husband wanted to try again right away. She told herself she was ready, she wanted to be ready. She wanted to give her daughter a sibling. Then her hidden pink, more than she realized was there, rose up from the basement and flooded the first floor.



THESE X-RAYS TELL THE INSIDE STORY OF
"PERFECT SLEEPER" POSTURE-PROTECTION

Commercials for expensive antigrief teas and household degriefers and spa treatments with grief-purifying essential oils flash on the television between segments of true crime, the victim's loved ones telling their stories from inside houses made smaller by so much grief, the walls pink and closing in, the floors thick with it. Their faces are covered in many hardened

layers, their heads huge, their eyes shining chips about to disappear.

Every few minutes, one of us hocks a grief loogie onto the floor. The bartender glares, threatens to cut us off. They say in the commercials that letting it out helps, but in my experience it just makes everything messier. Grief is not like guilt's hot iron or sadness's placid gray. It envelops the other emotions, flows fast and slow, sludgy with history, restless with anger, with longing. Its form keeps changing.

Sometimes I rub knees with a person who looks like you or who looks nothing like you. Sometimes I take them home. When we make love, we sweat pink and it binds our bodies together, makes it feel like we are becoming a third, better thing. It hurts more than it should to pull apart after, when I send them back into the night. I fall asleep with someone else's grief smeared on my freckled chest.

In the morning, I wake hungover and surprised, as if the cold, wet layer in my bed is its own weather, a sudden snow weighing on my body, almost a blanket, almost a comfort. I claw myself out and inspect the latest damage. Fresh blobs smatter the hallway. Taunt strings stretch from the bottoms of my feet, a spider web that collects my good sculpting knives and a care



"WE CAN BANG THIS SHIT OUT in a weekend. Then you don't have to worry about it," my best friend says before her annual visit.

She arrives the first night of Chanukah with a dusk-blue journal for us to write letters in and send back and forth, a dress for me that she sewed herself—she's a designer—and the lemon satsuma degriefer they sell at fancy grocery stores.

"Geez, it is kinda rough in here." She throws her long powder-blue coat over the one clean chair, opens the fridge and closes it. She looks brighter than I've seen her in a while, her lips the same color as her coat, her hair a fresh midnight blue. I'm glad she's left her latest boyfriend, a corporate lawyer with a love of Phish.

I pour us my good bourbon over ice. She lights the candles, turns on the grunge we loved growing up. We have at it, cleaning, singing, cleaning, starting in the bedroom and moving outward. "So I see you've been running," she says and laughs, a sneaker full of pink in her hand.

Soon the floorboards shine. She rolls up the pink-clotted carpet you and I found at Goodwill. We were hung over that day, a fight we'd had the night before about Wes Anderson—I found his movies sexist, you said I was being too harsh—lingering in our mouths. Browsing the skirts, I had the feeling of riding a flat-tired bike. You stayed in the movie section a long time, pulling DVDs, sliding them back. After a while, we both drifted to the aquamarine circle in home goods, squinted at the price. "Not bad," we said at the same time.

In your hands, a feminist horror movie you thought I'd like.

"It's ground so deep into the fibers. You'll never be able to clean it," my best friend says, heaving the rug out to the dumpster. I get an eerie feeling. The apartment is moving backwards in time. It is starting to feel like when we first moved in, slept on an air mattress while we waited for the Pod. It is starting to feel like we were never here at all. Who is she to tell me how to do this? She's never loved anyone more than a year. She thinks she knows so much. It is my grief. It is going away too fast, leaving me with only myself. "Look, let's take a break," I tell her, pulling the sponge from her hand harder than I mean to. "You're on vacation. Let's relax. Let me take us out." "Well, okay, if you're sure. Give me a minute."

She emerges from my office in a blue dress patterned with amber flowers, platform boots, and Lucite glasses filled with silver confetti. "You look like a punk Polly Pocket," I tell her, smiling.

She rolls her eyes. "It's a living, sort of." She's worried she'll never be able to focus on her own creations, will spend forever making pat designs for a big box store.

A MONTH AFTER YOU LEFT, I told myself, "Well, maybe I can make myself want a baby." I imagined myself ripped open, rearranged, holding our child. I imagined you adjusting its fingers on the neck of a guitar, spreading a kitchen table with good paper and pencils and showing our child how to press faces and color into white. I smiled thinking how patient and gentle you would be, how I'd seen you with your niece and nephew.

Then you were watching me hold the baby on my hip while I stirred a lentil soup, watching me teach the baby how to make a pinch pot, how to sculpt a dog, a bird, a tree. And you would love me more for this, I was sure. You would stay and stay and stay.

I did not allow myself to imagine looking down at myself from a great distance, watching my body perform the things that would keep the baby alive. I did not imagine thinking "eighteen years and then I can be myself again." I did not imagine a harder, deadlier grief growing in my abdomen, taking up the space where the baby had been, the kind of grief they don't make commercials about, the kind you can't cry or cough out, that responds to no treatments at all, not even time, the pink quartz that grows larger and heavier when you try to escape it, to do what you love, when you sculpt or run or visit your best friend, a grief that pulls you down, dragging you back home to what you tell yourself is pleasure, the kind that entombs your heart in the shape of a valentine heart, that paints a terrifying smile on your face.

At some hazy time of night, drunk on our last bottle of whiskey, I called you at your new apartment and said, "Okay, I can do it if that's what you want. I don't want to lose you."

"It's okay, you don't have to."

"No really, I think I've changed my mind. Let's try."

"I don't want it like this. It doesn't feel right. I'm sorry; I never planned any of this."

Lately I think: what is worse? That you left me, or that to keep you I had been willing to leave myself?



IF EXERCISE AND DIET FAIL, tenant is encouraged to try the following method:

Bring home all of your tools from the studio. Collect as much pink as possible. Combine it into a blob in the middle of the living room. Rest on the couch with an Aldi brand sparkling water. Remember how he called it dirtbag LaCroix and how you laughed hard even though it wasn't that funny.

Remember watching stand-up specials on this couch, how he hated when you pointed out the problematic parts, said you ruined all the jokes.

Pick up the Ruth Asawa book on the coffee table. Remember how he bought it for you in secret after you fell in love with the exhibit.

Sculpt the baby you won't have. Give it his eyes, your lips, his giant forehead that earned him the nickname Big Nog in grade school. Hold it in your arms for an hour; inert and cold. Feel your jaw tighten, the bile rise in your throat. Feel immense relief and sadness as you press it into a bowling ball, erasing all its features.

Sculpt your pink into the next woman he will date.

A woman a lot like your landlord, sweeter than you are, prettier, more at ease with herself, at ease with babies, in love with babies. You're sure she'll make a really excellent mother.

Then sculpt him with her, being sure to make him happier than he ever was with you, like your landlord's husband. Pull out your back carrying them both to the dumpster.

Sculpt mini versions of yourself at age ten, age twelve, age fifteen, age twenty, based on photographs you haven't seen in years. Give them wings, paws, horns, spiked backs. See how they grow progressively braver and also more afraid. Place them around your house. Walk among them, and say to them, "It's okay, it's okay, I love you, I'm taking care of us."



GRIEF ENGULFS OUR CITY UNEVENLY. One block is verdant, the brick houses freshly tuckpointed, the lawns flush with flowers. The next, the houses are collapsing in on themselves, piles of dirty pink making the porches and roofs sag, blocking the windows out. Eventually the city tears these down. In their place, McMansions and sleek apartment buildings go up, incorporating the latest in grief-proof design. They resemble spaceships from a distant planet, a place where they've solved heartbreak and loss, where they've replaced all the cigarettes and whiskey and crying jags and midnight internet purchases and regrettable sex with triathlon training and good espresso.

Unsurprisingly, the wealthy can remove their pink quickly and efficiently. They maintain a private landfill, pay for their own biweekly disposal. The rest of us wait for the city trucks. Our alley dumpsters overflow, pink combining with coffee grounds and rotting food and secret pregnancy tests and broken furniture. Birds fly onto the slimy mountains and get stuck. At night, we hear them calling.



Lately, on my walks home from the studio, I detour past my landlord's house. The air on her street smells of tangerines and fireplaces now that the evenings have turned colder. Fairy gardens surround old-growth trees. The sun is always setting. Bright triangles of light cut into my face. She has a peach tree in front and many vases and aquariums and crystal decanters of joy in the windows, shining worlds of orange gold. In the unfinished basement, a sea of grief churns but I don't know this yet. I only feel bitter.

I imagine her and her husband inside shuckingysters like we never learned to do. She's in the dress I saw her wear at an opening once, similar to my fuchsia one but with a cooler print, a sexier neckline. She squeezes lemon over the salty bodies. He stands behind her, wraps his fleshy hands around her waist, kisses her neck, bites down for an instant, leaves a plum circle like they are teenagers. She laughs, flecks of spit flying from her mouth. Upstairs their daughter practices on her child-size guitar, prepares a song to perform for them.

“I’m sorry, hon. I know things have been hectic. Just stay, please. I’m fine.” I throw the blanket off of me as if for emphasis. My jeans and cardigan are old and faded and itchy.

“Fuck off. I came all the way here and you’re not even trying to move on. It’s like I’m not even here.” She goes into my office and closes the door. The lock I didn’t know was there clicks.

I wake the next morning still in my clothes, in the afternoon. A stagnant pond of pink surrounds me in bed. My best friend is gone. On my phone her text reads, *LOVE YOU DARLIN. SORRY I HAD TO LEAVE. HOPE YOU’RE OKAY.*

I cough pink sludge for a long time. It coats my mouth, a taste like cheap beer and burnt, wet paper.

My best friend’s grief is gathered tightly inside her. If she doesn’t get adequate stretches of quiet in her apartment, it spools out, a silky pink thread that envelopes her entire body. The first time I saw it was in college, around when we met in a shitty drawing class. We were on her couch drinking Arbor Mist. She was telling me about her twin sister who died when they were teenagers.

As she spoke, it grew harder for her to breathe, the thread a tightening cocoon. I used her sewing scissors to carefully cut her out. Within minutes, her grief spun around her again. I cut her out again. We did this until morning.

IT IS STILL WINTER, the park down the street quiet with snow. I jog in the running shoes my best friend cleaned out, my muscles slowly coming awake, my lungs, though they feel stiff with pink, moving blue air through my body. The path beneath me is stained pink as if I am running on a painting on a hundred messy brushstrokes of loss.

As I remember how to swing my arms, balance my weight on the balls of my feet, I remember a time before you, getting in shape for preseason soccer, running my girlhood neighborhood in a different part of the country. Holiday lights still thread front-yard pines, cast a blue-gold sheen on morning snow. The dull warmth of my pink-gray home lifts from my skin, leaving me freezing, my hands numbing, my legs shaking until, at last, the work I am doing gives me my own heat.

The sweetgum trees are bare of leaves. Only the spiky balls of their seed pods dot the sky. I am carried in steady loops through the landscape, a part of it and also a separate creature moving through it, shaping it with my strides. I forget what is inside me, the pink tentacled like a sea monster, threatening to burst out and destroy anyone who comes too close.

Then I see the landlord and her husband farther down the path. He wears an orange hat, she a coral fleece. Her face is shadowed from lack of sleep, but I do not notice this at the time. All I see is her cute leopard leggings and the lovely streak of fuchsia in her hair and echoes of us. He lumbers behind her the way you did the few times we ran together. You were trying to get in better shape after your tour. You wore a T-shirt from your intramural softball team that said BALLS on the front. Your run was all elbows. “I’m a bad news bear. Help me out, coach,” you said and we both laughed.

My breath turns ragged. I cut away from them toward my house. Soon, globs of grief are rolling down my face. I collect them in my fist, press them into a ball as I run through the bright citrus of one street, the pink

decay of another, past a rusted Jeep drowning in pink, a bungalow splattered with what looks like Pepto Bismol, an above-ground pool collapsed, a yellow Fisher Price car with a toddler-sized pink boulder in the driver's seat, a toddler-sized baseball cap placed on its head. Other people's mourning weighs on the air, sits heavy on my chest. I speed up, imagine my pink flowing out of me all at once, giving me an empty, clean, whistling, healed self to start over in.

AT HOME, I CARVE THOUGHTS like small knives, use them to make many small cuts into myself. Why can't you want what other women want? If he really loved you, it wouldn't have mattered; if only you were softer, less angry, you'll never find a partner who doesn't want children. I take out our lease, which still smells of our Sunday breakfasts, of fresh coffee and the garlicky omelets with goat cheese you made us. I read the grief clause over and over:

It should not be hard for tenant(s) to maintain a basic level of grief upkeep. Tenant(s) agrees to treat premises like their body, assuming they love their body. Tenant(s) agrees to respect the self, to live in a way that is worthy of this joyful space. If tenant(s) fails to address any issues that arise in a timely manner, landlord reserves the right to evict them from the premises.



I take her to a neighborhood dive where we can karaoke. My best friend orders us fried pickles, mozzarella sticks, nachos. When a woman in a red dress smudged with pink sings "Goodbye Earl," she drags me onto the tiny linoleum dance floor. "Fuck him," she says, looking steadily at me as we sway in place, her dress swirling around her hips. "He didn't deserve you." I am filled with homesickness, but I say what I think she expects, the kind of anger I want to feel. "Seriously. Why are men?" Then I order us a bucket of beers.

Soon we are singing Alanis Morissette, our voices blurring together. *Would she go down on you in a theatre?* The women in the room howl and sing along. The pink smoke of all the night's sad songs seems to lighten. Back home, we settle onto the couch, the Baba Yaga blanket she quilted me in undergrad spread over our legs. She tells me about the grant she was just passed up for.

"Those assholes have no taste. You're brilliant," I tell her and pour myself more good bourbon though at this point I can't taste it.

Her eyes drift to my fireplace, which, instead of candles or wood, holds several bottles of wine, pink caked all over the glass. "So have you thought about moving out? I know the rent here can't be easy on your own."

"Eh, I still like it. And moving in winter, what a nightmare." I take a long sip of my bourbon.

"Not right now. I'm just saying in the future."

"Look, we actually had a real relationship. It's not as easy as just changing the scenery."

It comes out mean, like I intended. My best friend looks at me. "I think I should go to bed."

"But it's not even that late."

"It's 1 a.m. Actually, I might need to leave a day early. I'm feeling a little out of it lately. I can feel it, you know?"

Drink!

